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AUTHOR Copa, Patricia M.
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ABSTRACT

Using tools from ethonography, this study constructed a model of reflective practice drawn from the words and actions of a small group of field-based educators identified as being exemplary practitioners. The model portrayed a purposeful and dynamic process in which acute attention to context and factors was weighed against consciously evaluated goals and critically scrutinized means. The results of this reflection were directed toward making judgments regarding action which reflected optimal balance between polemics developed through observation and study. This reconception of the practice of educators, if determined to be more effective than other approaches, has implications for selection and hiring for pre- and in-service education, for supervision, and for future research and study. (CB)

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EXPLORING SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE TO IMPROVE THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATORS

Patricia M. Copa
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Department of Continuing and Vocational Education
127 Home Economics Building
1300 Linden Drive
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

(608) 262-3293/262-2660

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EXPLORING SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE TO
IMPROVE THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION

Abstract

Understanding the qualities of competent professional educators is an essential foundation for identifying potential teachers and for providing effective pre- and in-service instruction and support. Frequently, however, theoretical frameworks and study of these qualities have neglected to consider the reflective nature of professional thought and action in relation to one another.

Using tools from ethnography, this study constructed a model of reflective practice drawn from the words and actions of a small group of field-based educators identified as being exemplary practitioners by their superiors. The model portrayed a purposeful and dynamic process in which acute attention to context and factors was weighed against consciously-evaluated goals against critically-scrutinized means. The results of this reflection were directed toward making judgments regarding action which reflected optimal balance between polemics developed through observation and study.

This reconception of the practice of educators - if determined to be "better" than other approaches - has implications for selection and hiring, for pre- and in-service education, for supervision and for future research and study which focus on goals of: 1) Recognizing and supporting reflective practice, 2) Eliminating structures and policies that discourage such practice, and 3) Building mechanisms for developing elements of this orientation in new and less effective educators.

EXPLORING SUCCESSFUL PRACTICE TO IMPROVE THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATORS

The Search for Competence

The characteristics of "good" educators have long been a serious - perhaps a central - concern of administrators and supervisors, of university educators and, although not likely stated as such, of the clients they serve. It is not surprising then that these qualities have been the focus of considerable attention and study as ways are sought to improve pre-service and in-service education, hopefully resulting in better professional practice. The question, whether stated or unstated, which seems to guide these efforts is, "What distinguishes the practice of competent educators from that of untrained persons or colleagues who are less skilled?"

The answer to this query frequently has been pursued by focusing upon visible behaviors and translating these observations into lists of tasks or competencies. The contents of these lists supposedly encapsulate the knowledge and skills necessary to perform the responsibilities of a particular position. Proponents of this approach indicate that success will be assured when we perfect such operations as being able to analyze and record work behaviors accurately (Swanson and Gradous, 1986), identify "critical incidences" which permit inferences and predictions about actors (Flanagan, 1954), and distinguish and relate essential elements within patterns of behavior (Bronson, 1984; Love, 1984; McClelland, 1973; Wolf, 1984). When these challenges are met, it will be possible to identify and/or train the competent professional we desire.

On the other hand, critics maintain that the problems associated with the competency approach are far more serious than methodological issues alone. They challenge some of the basic assumptions upon which the approach is grounded, for example that:

- complex mental processes, essential to competent practice, can be observed and isolated
- thoughtful action can be removed from the context of which it is a part
- the composite of many smaller operations will ultimately equal the essence of the whole
- human functioning can adequately be conceived and recreated using a model derived from non-human (technical) sources.

(Aoki, 1984; Broudy, 1972; Monjam, 1979; Short, 1985; Tom, 1977; Wirth, 1975)

These concerns are of such a fundamental and significant nature that they suggest the need to re-examine the very basis upon which competent performance has been conceived and studied. It was from this position that this study was approached. An inquiry design was used which allowed the exploration and description of patterns of thinking and acting employed by practitioners identified as being competent or displaying exemplary practice (1) - before a restrictive framework was placed on observations. The findings of the study were never intended to be universal or generalizable to total populations; rather, they were considered as providing a better understanding of professional practice and a sounder empirical basis for future conceptualization. It was hoped that this conceptualization would encourage more effective research and pre- and in-service education and support for educational personnel.

The Design of the Study

A group of cooperative extension educators was chosen as participants in this study. Not traditionally thought of as vocational educators (teachers for the World of Work), these individuals nevertheless practice in settings and situations which are becoming increasingly common for what we think of as "real" vocational educators. They are not guided by pre-determined curriculum, controlled school schedules and hours, or bounded classroom environments. Instead, they must assess and evaluate the needs of a diverse clientele, only some of whom are attracted to group instruction. To be effective, they must interact and collaborate with many different individuals and groups mediating, but not compromising, differences in missions and structures (as well as personalities). They have to consider and employ a range of delivery approaches that are not normally available to the classroom educator. This list is far from exhaustive but it does emphasize that extension educators must make judgments based upon determination of the best courses of action considering a multitude of factors. In this way, study of the qualities of their practice has implications for understanding better the practice of other vocational educators.

It was decided that it was necessary to employ both interview and observational approaches to explore the practice of these professionals. Since true action is not thoughtless but, rather, involves deliberate reflection, it is necessary not only to understand what the actors say they do and why, but also to study what they actually do and why. Careful observations needed to be combined with probing interviews and information from one source had to be weighed and tested against the other.

For this reason, this study was designed to allow both interviews and observations with a limited number of extension agents. Five individuals identified by district and state leaders as being exemplary in their practice, were followed for three days each during which timed observations were recorded and formal and informal interviews conducted. In most cases, it was

possible to observe all the individuals involved in teaching, program planning, staff meetings, and intra-agency activities. The five educators were chosen from a larger group suggested by one or more of the leaders to represent a variety of roles, full and part-time positions, geographic areas, and years of service. The number permitted some diversity while still being manageable for the two fieldworkers.

Being exploratory and interpretive in approach, the study was guided by questions designed to elicit information that could be used for future study and professional development efforts:

1) What are the qualities that distinguish the practice of those professionals identified as exemplary by their supervisors?

2) How do general patterns of acting reflect themselves in particular contexts?

3) Are there factors that appear to promote or tend to inhibit the successful practice of professional educators? If so, what are they?

4) What implications do the findings of the study have for future research and for preservice and inservice education and supervision?

Major Findings

The interview tapes were transcribed and observation notes expanded. Ethnographic analysis techniques (specialized qualitative analysis procedures) were used to examine and analyze the data; specifically, interviews and observations were studied for the presence of repeating themes. These important ideas and their relationships were examined for patterns based upon how and where words and actions were used in several different contexts. The availability of observational as well as interview data provided a rich opportunity for testing the relations of theory and practice. Gradually, it was possible to construct a model which portrayed the dynamic elements comprising the thoughtful action of these exemplary professionals.

This paper will briefly outline some of the major elements encompassed in four primary themes which together appeared to provide the framework for viewing the practice of the educators studied. Chart A shows the relationship of these themes - or elements of competent practice - as this relationship seemed to appear in the data analysis. It is critical to emphasize that the components of this model are not static, mutually-exclusive operations. Rather, they are dynamic, interactive processes constantly and consciously used and refined in real situations by proactive, reflective persons. Even double arrows on charts are unable to communicate this dynamism; it is necessary to rely upon

the words of the educators themselves to convey some of the energy found. The primary themes then were as follows:

A. Acute Sense of Context -
The educators studied demonstrated notable sensitivity to the social, political, historical and cultural conditions of the settings in which they worked.

B. Thoughtful Loyalty to Goals -
These individuals knew where they were going and weighed their judgments in relation to consistency or inconsistency with these carefully-considered ends. Sometimes alternative goals were evaluated; however, certain primary ends appeared to guide all action. Goals provided consistency to otherwise situationally-specific conditions.

C. Careful Consideration of Alternative Means -
(with their projected consequences) The group's repertoire of means was impressive but also closely related to the initiative each person took to explore nontraditional resources, several different colleagues and alternative technologies. The array of means made it possible to select among many and to consider trade-offs when suggested by context and goals.

D. Reflective Judgments Based on Balance -
Deliberate, thoughtful decisions were made about the best course of action to take in particular situations. These judgments appeared to involve consideration of optimal balance between alternatives which created a sense of contradition or tension.

A. Acute Sense of Context

When county-level educators (and, in another part of the study, their supervisors) were asked to describe the characteristics of competent professionals, they almost always mentioned "knowing one's county" as one very important trait. The group studied demonstrated what it professed to be significant. The five agents' awareness of the county extended to being keenly aware of the social, political, economic and cultural forces that were operating. They knew and respected the individual qualities and needs of the people involved in their program - clients, local and state professionals, office colleagues and, in just as deliberate and reflective a manner as these others, themselves.

Being aware of the "big picture" was considered critical but not something a person was able to master immediately. The big picture involved looking "at the whole picture, at the program planning, see what the needs are, look at the clientele whom you are programming to, how do you design a program that's going to meet those needs for those people...".(D)* Although one could consult others and gather information from a number of different sources, the educators felt that they were responsible for putting the information together into a whole upon which decisions could be based.

> "I wouldn't want to have an advisory committee make these decisions because they don't know all the contingencies that I'm working with. I'm going to do it...".(D)
>
> ". . .let people know that, while we're not taking 100% of your suggestions, we're taking as many as we can to put this all together." (C)

The information which informed this view of the total situation came from many different sources. The agents were able to cite such statistics as numbers of child abuse cases, percent of working mothers with young children, and teenage pregnancies. They referred to the numbers of people working second shift, couples that did not know where they were spending their money, and different ethnic and socio-economic groups within their counties as they spoke of special needs and interests. Being attuned to these special qualities of the people within the population made it possible to develop programs and approaches that were uniquely-tailored to those they served:

> "We get very involved in understanding our community... We have done some looking at cultural eating patterns among the Hmong, Spanish American, the Native American- and have done some in-depth work in understanding the culture behind common eating practices. Rather than just saying, "O.K. people don't drink milk." Why don't they? How does that affect their religion and their culture and everything else and so we've done quite a bit of in-depth (study) in cultural aspects." (C)
>
> "...That's so important that you need to really know who you're talking to and to relate to them as people and not just objects sitting there." (A)
>
> "...That sense of what the local values are, how hard you push on things, when you back off." (B)

* Letters following quotes are coded identifiers for the five extension educators who participated in the study.

"The knowledge that I feel is most valuable is realizing that people are unique and that you are trained, you have knowledge, but that knowledge only does you good if you can translate that into understandable terms that are relevant to the person or groups that you are working with. And, it's that ability to translate - to make information come alive- so that people can understand how it affects their lives. That a decision one way or the other would affect them in some way. That you can give them that kind of a reference point so that they can make decisions based on that and improve their lives." (C)

The second group of people that the agents knew well and considered carefully in their work were other professionals, both inside and outside of their offices. Two observations concerning the educators' relationships to these other people were quite apparent as the data were examined and analyzed. First, the educators were very judgmental in their assessment of other professionals; second, other professionals were considered important parts of the context within which the agents worked: "I think I feel like, you know, people help me with things. So I help them with things and we can all be better if we work together on it." (A)

Professionals at the state, local and office levels were scrutinized carefully to determine their potential contributions to ideas, information and support. Some were dismissed as partners and were interacted with on a limited basis " because, frankly, she doesn't have much to contribute."(A) Some specialists were consulted more than others ("there is always a certain number who aren't real effective," -B) although new state people who had been disappointing in an initial contact might be given "one more chance."(E) Colleagues who "just aren't suited properly to Extension," "can't relate to people," or "complain a lot" were tolerated but not actively pursued.

More often, the educators spoke of other colleagues with whom they had contact who stimulated and "stretched" them as persons and professionals. These were individuals they currently sought out and frequently joined with in common programming efforts; others had contributed to their growth in the past. When asked, none of the persons studied hesitated to decribe mentors who had been --

"very supportive...helped me along and pushed me further than I thought I could go,...would question me (on things I just took for granted) and then it would make me understand things." (A)

"That's where I valued _____(district program leader) - she kind of picked my brain and when I came to the end of the road in my thoughts, she would send me down a new path." (D)

At this point in their careers, the agents appeared more likely to look for the stimulation they previously had obtained from mentors from their peers instead. Almost all reflected upon the qualities of the people they sought for ideas and energizing.

> "So, when you need someone who is easy to talk to you go to someone similar but to stretch yourself, you go to someone different." (C)

> "I like to get as much from a relationship as I give and with _____ (a colleague), for example, I feel I do. And so she stretches me and I stretch her. And I think the product is always bigger and better than either one of us could have done individually." (E)

> "There're lots of sharp ladies (county extension agents) in Wisconsin.. the ideas people have and the things they're working on... there's just a lot of neat things to learn out there... I really find it a peer group that pushes me. When most of the time that I've worked I've always felt that I was better than the people I worked with. Well, in this group, I feel challenged easily." (A)

Another group of professionals within and outside the office provided a network for generating ideas and for developing joint programming with diverse audiences. Each of the agents studied tapped the staff of a carefully-selected group of private and public organizations to extend her programming efforts and resources. These people usually related to the home economist on a professional level and did not provide the intense personal and emotional stimulation characterized by the persons described earlier.

Finally, the scrutiny applied to others was directed by the educators on themselves, acknowledging their own roles as central players in the county context. The "objectivity" (and critique) they demonstrated is noteworthy:

> "It's a weakness of mine (not being by nature an `intuitive' person) and, unless somebody tells me or I ask enough questions to really find out what's going on, I may often times go on my merry way and assume things are fine and so forth." (C)

> "I think I work in the cognitive area, and I want to work much more than at the knowledge level. I really want them to change behaviors so that means that I need both..." (cognitive and affective) (E)

> "I tend to be a big planner but my follow-through sometimes doesn't live up to my plans." (D)

The critical stance the agents took toward themselves was counter-balanced by an optimistic, positive approach. Perceived weaknesses were not regarded necessarily as barriers or constraints but, rather, accepted conditions that one needed to "work on", overcome, or work around. Someone in a job-sharing situation looked for a partner with expertise in content areas in which she felt weaker. Others purposely associated with colleagues who possessed strengths they themselves lacked. ("I think that's one of the reasons why we work together well as a team is that we each have skills in different areas..." - D) On the other hand, all treated what they considered "weaknesses" as challenges to be acknowledged and conquered:

> "Sometimes you have to do things you're not good at but you get better at them." (C)

> ". . .I have to work real hard on that part of it. I mean that's where I have to exert the discipline, really have to sit on myself. So, when I hand you those reports that are finished, that's a big behavior change on my part." (D)

Not surprisingly, the proactivity characterizing the agents' approach to themselves and to what they thought they should be was found in many other areas of their practice. One of these areas was the vision each had of her present work and what she planned for her career in the future. This attention to a personal future became another part of the total context. Only one agent spoke of various ways of enriching her present job since she felt no changes were in sight.

> "Basically, I'm in a dead-end job. There's no advancement for me. So, unless there is enough diversity - a new challenge that comes to keep me interested. I mean, what do I aspire to?" (D)

The others had made mental plans and, occasionally, actual arrangements for "next steps" in their careers. Most of these plans involved further education and deliberately pursuing other positions. One person explained that she was always open to new opportunities that came along and would not be adverse to leaving. Consequently, although they acted as though they intended to work in their current positions in the foreseeable future, this long-term commitment had parameters and limits. Without a doubt, the openness to other career possibilities as viable alternatives made risk-taking and success/failure take on different perspectives. These were not people who put all their eggs in a single basket and, consequently, they could afford to try new ideas.

B. <u>Thoughtful Loyalty to Goals</u>

The educators were not asked specifically about the goals they set and used to guide their work. On the other hand, the

five spontaneously discussed the purposes of their efforts and the principles they used to direct their decisions and judgments. Although the words used were different among the agents, all displayed a great deal of clarity in the directions they plotted and in the ends they said they were trying to reach. In addition, they emphasized the critical importance of using clearly-defined goals to focus planning activities:

> "You have a clear idea of where you're going...If you have a clear idea of your purpose and your intent, then you can make those decisions: Do I team up with the technical school? Do I team up with the Commission on Aging? Do I team up with the schools --or don't I? Do I go on my own?" (C)

Since these individuals had not been asked directly to define the "purpose and intent" that served as their guide, interviews were studied carefully for indications of what they appeared to see serving those roles. What emerged was a hierarchy of goals with some broad, higher level ends guiding more specific objectives which were often weighed in relation to one another in particular situations.

A term that was used frequently to specify one of the most pervasive goals subscribed to by the agents was "the extension mission" or "the purpose of extension." Normally, the interviewees used the term as an apparently self-explanatory concept and then immediately moved on to other topics. Again, careful scrutiny of the interview transcripts was necessary to uncover what was meant. Clues were found in reflections, such as the following in which one person decribed how she would like people to react after they had had contact with her and her program:

> "Extension is a good thing: They're flexible. They teach down to earth. They are part of the University so their information is up-to-date, current. They're people persons, you know. They take the group's questions. They don't laugh at you. If you have questions after class, you can call them. They're available." (C)

Thus, one of the characteristics of Extension's mission appeared to be to provide sound, accurate information (because of its University origin) in a non-threatening, accessible and relevant manner. If the frequency with which an item was mentioned were any indication of its perceived importance, then the provision of research-based information ranked high as an end. On another level, however, it would seem that information might not always be an end in itself (although it could well be) but, rather, a means to reach other goals.

For some of the educators, another kind of goal appeared to take precedence. These people spoke of directing programs toward

the needs of families, areas of high concern - "right up there", issues of importance and "priority". They described a range of ways they determined these areas - from formal needs assessment processes to informal monitoring of phone inquires and other questions. Thus, the kind of program planned was definitely related to mission and goals.

On the other hand, another cluster of priorities probably provided an even better indication of the most important level of goals articulated by most of the educators at some time in the conversations. They cited the desirability of helping "people take their own actions" (D), evaluating "how people changed and how their lives improved" (D), encouraging people to "develop themselves" and assessing the "growth of individuals" (C), and striving toward making a group "a stronger organization" (C). Occasionally, individuals spoke of proactivity, empowerment, and independence:

> "Was your involvement more than just an activity? And, if you can't pull back and pull out and have that group function, then you haven't done your job. You've gotta do that job and so you come into groups, you move out of groups. You do this for an audience, you pull back. And, you hope that you are eventually pulling all of it forward." (C)

More systematic exploration of the "extension mission" and of the ultimate goals considered by competent extension personnel is an important effort meriting more attention. The relationship of these goals to professional practice is of equal or greater concern.

In addition to these primary goals, another level of priorities, not as basic or generalizable as the first, was employed by the agents. One person described this multi-level structure in this way:

> "It's like here's a larger goal and now here are the objectives under that goal and where are the key areas and persons that need that kind of information? And, in that way, you can put together a whole host of teaching methods and you can build on. One thing leads to another and you can see a time table develop so you can see some continuity." (C)

The priorities which apparently fell into this category of "objectives" were more numerous and diverse than the higher-level goals discussed earlier. Furthermore, they appeared to be more situation-specific and open to negotiation when choices needed to be made. Many of these might be called "pragmatic" in focus and/or rooted in political rather than altruistic considerations: increased visibility, personal pay-off, "best chance of success," and the "risks and costs professionally and personally." The educators systematically weighed combinations of these objectives

or outcomes against others that were considered relevant to particular circumstances:

> "I really try to see a balance in a month. . .I try to see: 'Well, was I in different parts of the county and how many people did I reach and were they new people or were they established clientele? How many people will they reach and of what value is it to that group that I was there?" (A)

Thus, avoidance of duplication with other professional colleagues, the availability of state resources, adequacy of breadth and significance - all these became objectives which served as criteria or standards for choosing among alternatives. The thread that held these individual decisions together was the higher-level goals such as promoting independent, capable individuals and families. Using these two levels of goals, the educators were able to chart a consistent yet flexible course of action. With these goal posts as guides, they were not apt to fall into the trap --

> ". . .that you don't take a group of people on a common road and you're just jumping all over and they don't have a clear mission and they can't communicate a clear mission and so whatever fire flares up, they react to it and then go (leave)." (C)

C. <u>Careful Consideration of Alternative Means</u>:

The pool of alternatives for addressing needs and goals from which the study participants drew was rich and supplemented by their vision, creativity and ability to develop new possibilities. Although the study took place in a period of serious fiscal and personnel cut-backs, these people displayed a remarkably positive outlook for their programs and for the potential of the future. When an agent complained about colleagues who made excuses for not doing things as they "blamed everything on the system," she was asked what the real barriers were. She replied:

> "I don't know. You see, I'm a real possibility thinker kind of person. . . I think most barriers are inside. There's plenty to do within the guidelines of what we have for our job that you can find enough to do without it being a glaring thing that would be in opposition to what our purposes are." (A)

This optimism and proactivity was evident in the conversations and everyday activity of the agents. They used phone calls, business and instructional gatherings as well as spontaneous one-to-one encounters as opportunities to explore new ideas, arrange joint efforts, and schedule future contacts.

"I go and really check out who's there and really try to make the most of the time. . .I don't think I've ever done anything that I didn't see some pay-off down the line somewhere, always kind of unexpected. It's always worth it. Somebody calls you later or asks you to do something else or even some of the dumbest things I've had to do paid off some way that I did not expect." (A)

Most of the agents had supplemented their resources with support from small grants and special state projects. They also teamed with other local professionals and organizations to enrich their programs, reach new audiences, and increase their efficiency:

"You can't do the publicity, the press release, the mailing of thousands of brochures and evaluate. You can't do all those steps if your main role is teaching. And so, when you link up with other agencies or nonprofits - schools or churches - they do the leg work. They get the word out, they get the group there and they get the lights on and they set the room up. You can be the educator and you can do the evaluation. . ." (C)

When resources were not available, almost everyone in the group described situations in which they alone or working with others developed them. Their programs were all generally ahead of state initiatives in at least some areas and that meant support materials and in-service had not been developed for programs they wanted to implement:

"Usually we will do the issue a year before the state hits onto it so usually the state hasn't geared up for it yet... Usually it comes too late so I usually need to do it myself..." (B)

"If you wait long enough, things come but, in the meantime, we felt the need to do something else." (C)

In cases such as these, agents tended to consult state subject matter specialists, do their own reading and study and conduct an individual search for other resources and teaching materials. Some in the group had written series of newsletters, informational brochures and developed videos when system resources were unavailable; these were almost exclusively done in consultation with a state specialist.

All these efforts produced a wide array of means to consider when choosing ways to implement an educational program. Having alternatives to select from was regarded as being a desirable situation:

"I think there are a lot of tools that we need and what you need is a big basket of resources so that you can

pull out the tool you need; you know, one that is appropriate to the situation and the location and whatever." (E)

On the other hand, tools were carefully scrutinized for their quality and for the particular use that was being considered. Information, advice and materials underwent critical examination before they were accepted and put in the pool. The following comment was made in relation to the person's feelings about state specialists' input but it also portrays the skeptical orientation with which the agents approached consideration of any potential resource:

> "I say, 'O.K. You're there on the campus in the Ivory Tower.' And, they're going to tell me all this theoretical stuff about how the world should be. And I say, 'O.K. Fine.' And, some of what they say may be real valuable and it would help me in my thinking but I also have made some observations and might have something to contribute there." (D)

Consequently, one agent explored the use of mailing a set of public policy materials to all interested groups in her county, as a colleague had done, and decided against doing it since she determined the materials to be "a resource tailored to a specific need." Another considered directing a young parent support program toward court-mandated referrals as another county had done but decided there were more drawbacks in her situation than benefits. Sometimes options were actually tested in action in circumstances that involved limited risk:

> "I can pilot test it. See how it goes. And, if I embarrass myself, only ten people will know. If it goes real well, then I can really get out and promote it, like for next spring." (A)

In summary, many options were located or created and thoughtfully examined but not all survived the critical scrutiny.

"Big pictures" and goals appeared to be the primary standards against which means were screened (refer to Goals and Context in Chart A). Activities could not exist or be thought to exist on their own but, rather, needed to contribute to the whole:

> "I don't just **do activities.** They have to have a purpose and they have to fit in with my criteria of what I'm trying to accomplish in life." (C)

It is in the area of activities that the professionals studied drew definite lines between what they were trying to accomplish and what they observed in some of their peers. These observations were valuable in that they gave some possible

indications of where competent practice might differ from that which is less successful:

> "I see a lot of agents especially get in trouble because they get so caught up in the activities. They don't see how the activities fit into the larger focus and they organize to death. I mean, all the points are covered but yet the whole project they are working on didn't fit in. Or, that they're so spotty that they don't build on anything." (C)

> (Quality of successful practice) "is the approach to the job that sees, I guess, the big picture rather than isolated little incidences that you do this and you do that. A lot of times when we're asked to share what we do. . .it turns out to be a calendar of events. You know: "Next Tuesday I'm teaching this program at that meeting. And, I'm doing this leader training in January. It's just always isolated events. And, I say, 'That's not my program. Those are parts of what I'm doing but that's not my **program'**. . .I see a lot of agents that only see these isolated events and that's all they do. They're not coherent, relevant, tied-together programs." (D)

The culmination of this generation of alternatives, careful evaluation of each option and determination of fit to over-all program goals was the implementation of a broad array of different delivery structures and mechanisms selectively adapted to audiences, objectives and situations. Ongoing programs were conducted efficiently with minimal agent effort through such strategies as: newsletter series distributed by office staff using "automatic" systems, newspaper releases and radio broadcasts developed in defined time periods using previously-gathered materials and presentations offered on limited, specified themes to several different groups. The resources saved by carefully managing and/or delegating these activities were directed toward more time and energy-consuming activities such as making new contacts, studying unfamiliar conditions or program areas, and/or planning and implementing future endeavors. When observed closely and interpreted with the help of the actors involved, it was evident that the Means component of the home economists' work was an critical area in which reflective practice was necessary.

D. Reflective Judgments Based on Balance:

The judgments which evolved from the thoughtful consideration of Context, Goals, and Means were seriously-examined, deliberate, and responsive in their nature. The educators were able to explain and defend their decisions in terms of the conclusions they had reached in weighing particular contextual factors against designated goals against relevant and available means. The agents explained they were generally

reluctant to veer far from a course of action they had settled on after careful deliberation (note that not all decisions were of this nature and held with this intensity).

When some of the judgments of the agents were examined, it was possible to construct a picture of the process by which they had perceived a situation as problematic, had increasingly become aware of certain tensions or polarities operating within the alternatives they determined to be open to them and then had used the Context/Goals/Means conclusions to arrive at an optimal balance or resolution which mediated the tensions for a particular situation. An observer began to see bipolar structures such as those depicted under Judgments in Chart A with continua existing between them. The professionals appeared to make judgments that fell at particular points along the continuum, creating a specific degree of balance between the polarities for a particular dilemma situation.

One agent described an experience such as this when she struggled with the best way to approach financial counseling with families referred to her by another agency. The content was not comfortable for her and she had not programmed in the area before as she undertook the task (she accepted the request in order to understand what money management problems troubled families and how they thought about them in order to develop educational programs in this new focus area).

> "First, I had to know what the problems are so I can figure out what to do about them. To figure out what I don't know and learn it. And so, I did that with families and at first I thought I didn't know enough. This family has a problem and I can't figure out the solution to their problem. But it's because I don't know enough. And, so I tried to get as much information as I could and read a lot and talked to people and finally came to the conclusion that there is no (one right) answer to their problem. There is no answer that I can find someplace to their problem. It's not my job to solve their problem. That what I can do here is help them understand the process and I can give them help - help them learn some skills when it comes to money management. I can give help in learning to make decisions, help them develop a spending plan and the ball is in their park. . .Then I could figure out what to teach and how to put it in ways that are relevant and meaningful to people." (C)

In this example, the professional first struggled with a definition of the problem and sought to identify the salient issues (the concepts which eventually became the ends of the continua) in responding to it. She did not take the problem exactly as communicated to her by the agency requesting the service. She realized the complexity of the factors involved and gradually set up choices in response to this complexity. In this

particular case, she felt pulled between technical information, where she first went for answers, and a more personal/social conception of knowing. In her reflection, she found the technical information inadequate in and of itself and decided that her clients' own experiences, values, and beliefs would also have to guide their decisions. She also weighed another polemic or tension as she considered either being immediately responsive to the explicit request ("solving" the peoples' problems for them) or helping them learn a process for making their own decisions. By talking with many people as she pondered, she tried out different alternatives. Finally, she acted upon her reflections.

All of the educators spoke of the complexities of their environments and quandries. One observed:

> "It's increasingly difficult to feel competent. . . It seems like the issues are more and more complex. I think some of the people were saying to me 'it's so complicated. Just give me an easy answer.' It seems there isn't any easy answer anymore. I get frustrated as a home economist because we cover so many different areas and each of them is becoming increasingly complex." (B)

The polarities that the study participants established varied depending upon the situation. Some tensions observed involved those existing between responsiveness and taking a stand, between visibility for oneself and the program and empowering others, between seeing the big picture and being attentive to details, between the value of technical information and a more personal kind of knowing, and between one's own private life and job responsibilities and demands. In their quest for balance, the educators were keenly aware of the trade-offs:

> In relation to office sharing: "It limits your productivity to some extent but it does help to build rapport." (B)
>
> "There's that focus of trying to be more efficient, and there's the avenue of being responsive to local needs." (C)
>
> "I'm always conscious if I choose X, Y will not get done. I make conscious trade-offs." (C)

Although the reflective process was kept open and fluid as all the preceding elements were studied, at a certain point, a judgment was made and action was taken. Sometimes an external deadline provoked this point of closure; other times, a more subjective, internal time frame appeared to operate. Whatever the reason, the individuals studied did not find it difficult to determine the time to move from reflection to action. They

discussed when and how they decided to close off study of a particular dilemma and make a judgment:

> "I talk to a lot of people. I bounce ideas off many people before I make a decision. . .I don't make snap decisions and I get a lot of input before I decide. Once I decide, I probably will stick to a course of action." (B)

> "I'll spend time in planning but then it's like 'Let's go for it! Let's not just sit and complain about the same thing year after year after year." (C)

The group spoke of sometimes coming to a judgment that was not appropriate for the particular time and conditions. Their commitment to a particular action remained and they seemed to "file the decision away" for more favorable times: "I am still committed to the idea of an over-all extension advisory committee but it is just that the time wasn't right. . .new staff. . .the resources weren't there." (C)

Whatever the judgments made, they were deliberate and conscious. They were not capricious nor were they made by someone else (e.g., unquestioningly following county or state directives). The judgments were followed by action based on the reflection. The agents were able to find an effective balance between the careful thinking and the reasoned action needed to perform their jobs well. They did not appear to become paralyzed by the complexity of the task, susceptible to the verbalism-talk without action - described by Paulo Freire. Likewise, they did not act (rather behave) without having engaged in serious thought. This balance may well be the most critical element of competent practice.

Summary and Implications

Study Findings:

Traditional approaches to portraying competence have commonly identified critical kinds of behaviors and have described the essential elements within each. Certainly, the present study also found activities and ways of implementing them that were distinct and characteristic of the exemplary professionals it examined. These educators **did** planning, teaching, question answering, group meetings, reports and evaluations, and T.V. and radio presentations. However, it was not **what** the agents did but **how** they did it that distinguished their activity from others.

The five individuals studied engaged in the thoughtful process of reflection-in-action described by Schon (1983). Through this process, they carried on a serious interchange with their particular settings and situations. They observed carefully and with skill. They formulated ideas, conclusions,

and tentative plans. They tested embryonic approaches and watched. They scrutinized the ends they had set and weighed them in light of their observations, although some goals were held sacred and not open to compromise. And, they made thoughtful judgments and acted upon them, again attending carefully as they planned for the future. All these activities were done as a whole and involved a dynamic, deliberate, interactive process that was undertaken with conscious, responsive and reflective thought.

Thus, what were the qualities and general patterns of acting that distinguish the practice of these professionals identified as exemplary by their supervisors? (Study questions #1 and #2) These essential qualities appeared to be the abilities to engage in serious, reflective, effective thought about the complex, changing human worlds in which they operated and to develop proactive, productive actions adapted to these worlds. Neither activity is of any value without the other, but these individuals were able to join the two together into an effective whole that successfully served the people and conditions involved.

Referring to the third study question which asked what factors appeared to promote and inhibit successful practice, the answers may seem contradictory. From one stance, external factors seemed less critical since these individuals tended to create their own opportunities and find or develop the stimulation and support they needed. On the other hand, each spoke of the special people and the essential resources and supports she drew upon inside and outside of the extension system that sustained her in her practice.

Implications for Theory and Practice:

Early in this paper, a statement was made that this study was not an attempt to describe the thinking and action of all competent community-based vocational educators. Rather, the study findings should provide "a better understanding of professional practice and a sounder empirical basis for future conceptualization". . . encouraging "more effective research and pre-and in-service education and support for educational personnel." What is a study such as this able to teach teacher educators and administrators and what recommendations are justified in light of a small sample size and non-psychometric design?

First, a study which allows the detailed exploration of thought and action as employed in actual practice is apt to raise more questions than it answers. It opens unexamined areas for further study and discussion, encouraging scrutiny of what has been accepted at face value and taken for granted. For example, if competent community-based educators tend to employ the kinds of reflective thinking and action described in this paper (and more study using a different inquiry design would be necessary to make this case), is this the best approach they could use? Or,

for example, are they forced into ways and directions of operating that are logically and ethically non-defensible - by factors within the institution in which they are employed or in the settings in which they teach? In the past, a linear decisionmaking model has been accepted as desirable and presented as the ideal. An alternative design will not be better solely because it is different. Although it is believed that a convincing case - using logical, effectiveness and ethical considerations as support - may be advanced for the kind of professional practice described in this study, such case building and defending is essential, but requires at least another conference paper of this size.

If, however, we were to determine that reflective practice is desirable and worth fostering, what are some ways that this might be done? Given that past performance is the best predictor of future functioning in similar settings, a better understanding of the practice of competent professionals has implications for selection and hiring. Realizing that **how** programming efforts were undertaken is more important than **what** activities were done, the **process** by which a potential employee made particular judgments and acted on them would be critical to understand and would form the basis of interview questions. What elements of context were considered - if any - and how did they inform the reasoning process? Were goals consciously used in determining directions and potential alternatives? What were the range and source of means that were weighed? Were all of these considerations reflectively related together in forming a "big picture" that was used to arrive at a judgment that could be defended effectively? These processes can probably only be described and reconstructed in the context and history of a real dilemma. Thus the interview situation and/or the requests for written materials might vary considerably form that which is presently used.

Some implications of the study findings for encouraging reflective practice center around **not** discouraging or impeding its operation. For example, do structures and policies within the educational system or institution convey subtle and not-so-subtle messages concerning proactive judgment making? Are incentives provided for educators to wean individuals and groups or are these people merely lost to accounting and reward systems? Are alternative technologies and other delivery methods encouraged when appropriate - or, are traditional means the only formats acknowledged on reporting forms? The educators in this study reported that they were usually 6 - 24 months ahead of state initiatives; is the system flexible and progressive enough to support and encourage this kind of enterprise? Briefly, do structures facilitate or discourage the kinds of practice advanced to be of value?

Finally (because of space constraints), what can be done to develop more reflective practice in aspiring and practicing professional educators? This study seems to indicate that it is

essential to consider the unique situations in which community-based educators find themselves and the ways in which they experience and must act within these settings. The linear model we have frequently used for pre-service and in-service instruction - that of applying generalizable knowledge and facts to particular problems - appears deficient in many respects. The concerns which educators encounter are found in unique contexts involving distinctive combinations of needs, wants, values, traditions, interests, resources, relationships, and histories. Professionals must weigh all these factors in interaction as they make sound judgments and implement reasoned actions. In-service and pre-service programs need to acknowledge and build upon the **contextual** nature of professional practice and the reflective judgment that is required. Might not the reasoning-oriented case study approach used by field such as medicine and law provide a better model for instructional programs? Ways of developing and using knowledge in real or simulated situations might well become the focus of training, rather than mastering prescribed facts and generalizations by themselves.

Likewise, supervisors and teachers are not likely to present themselves as experts and reservoirs of ready-made answers. Rather, they might well see their role as sources of better questions. Mentors, colleagues, fellow explorers as opposed to authorities, bosses, or superiors might better capture their reconceived positions and functions. Genuinely respecting the professionals' capabilities and knowledge of their unique settings, these instructors and supervisors would continually strive to challenge these abilities and deepen the understandings in order to improve practice. They are apt to raise different alternatives and possibilities and encourage the trial of nontraditional approaches and perspectives. They would challenge the professionals with whom they work to think through all components of the judgment process and arrive at creative but rationally-grounded decisions. The stimulation they offer might provide strong positive incentives for good professionals like the five study participants who thrive on being "stretched" to remain in their positions and to grow.

The questions raised are challenging; the responses suggested are not easy "quick-fix" remedies. Real changes involve critically examining and revising systems and people with interests and investments to protect. On the other hand, the pay-offs are compelling - for programs, for students, and for society as a whole.

NOTE

1. Using district and state-level staff in the identification of county personnel who displayed exemplary practice, although admittedly not "objective," was considered justifiable for the following reasons.

   - These individuals represent the leadership in the extension family living program. As such, they were often thought of as being able to observe a variety of different kinds of practice.

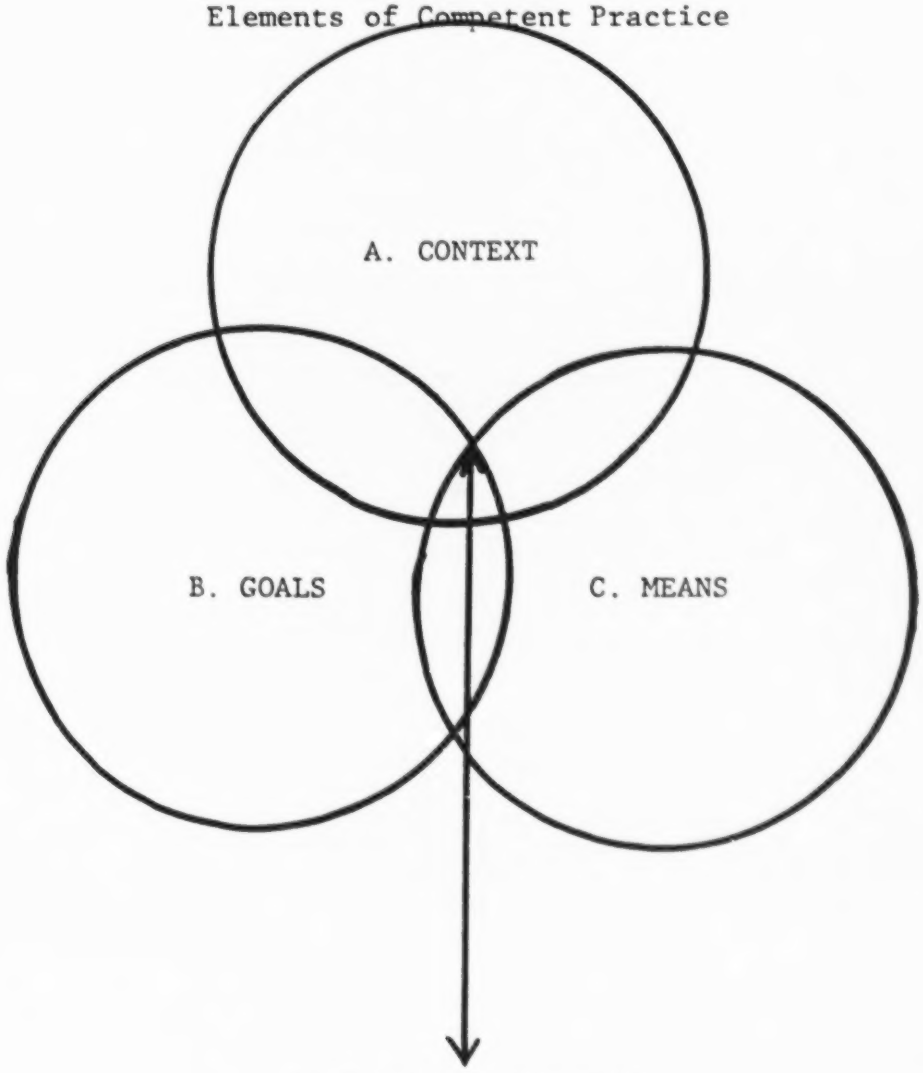
   - These people were in roles in which they might actually define and create particular kinds of valued practice through providing rewards and in-service experiences.

   The study design reflected the assumption that exemplary practice in a particular field was not necessarily an absolute quality but, rather, was affected by the norms and perceptions of its membership - as reflected by its leaders.

Chart A

Relationships Among

Elements of Competent Practice



REFLECTIVE JUDGMENTS

(QUEST FOR BALANCE)

TENSIONS BETWEEN SUCH POLARITIES AS: (Not all-inclusive; some are more relevant in certain settings/situations)

Responsiveness	----------	Taking a Stand
Visibility of Self/Program	----------	Empowering Others
Big Picture	----------	Detail Work
Private Life	----------	Job Responsibilities/ Demands
Technical Information	----------	Personal/Social Knowing

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